



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

XII.—INDICO LEGNO.

“Oro ed argento fino, cocco e biacca,
Indico legno lucido e sereno,
Fresco smeraldo in l'ora che si fiacca”

are the substances Dante cites in *Purgatorio*, VII, 73–75, as being surpassed in color by the flowers and grass of the Valley of the Princes. The criticism on verse seventy-four divides into two schools according to the punctuation assigned to the passage by commentators. One section, and perhaps the greater, holds that Dante meant the whole line to refer to one substance, some word from India; the other, putting a comma after the first word, has it that the poet had two colors in mind when he wrote the words: the color of indigo and that of some “wood shining and clear,” which latter is however rather dull and obscure of interpretation. Among the substances guessed at by the commentators there is none that fits well the sense of the passage, neither ebony nor “quercia marcia” having colors appropriate to a description of bright flowers. Philalethes joined those who hold that “indico” should be interpreted as meaning indigo rather than Indian, feeling a need of blue among the flower colors. In the meadows of Saxony corn flower, speedwell, lungwort and borage are common on every hand and make generous gift of pure blue to the kaleidoscope of nature; but did Dante have any such association with the color? What place does blue hold in the *Divina Commedia*? It is surprising to find that there are only five references in the whole poem that surely can be interpreted “blue.” In the *Inferno* we have two of the purses worn by the usurers described with azure in the blazon (*Inf.*, XVII, 59 and 64). In *Purgatory* the noonday light turns the heavenly blue to white (*Purg.*, XXVI, 6) and in two passages the heavens have the color of sapphire (*Purg.*, I, 13, and *Par.*, XXIII, 101). In

one passage we cannot be quite sure that "smalto" may not mean blue—the doubt hinging on an ambiguity of reference to the earthly or the heavenly paradise; the frequent use Dante makes of the word to describe greensward is rather a strong argument for the former interpretation. This scarcity of blue in the coloring of the *Divina Commedia* is the more striking when we remember how rich in cobalt, ultramarine, and smalt were the illuminations and frescoes that made up the art of Dante's contemporaries, and how strong the visual-istic power of the artist was in Dante.

As to the flowers that Dante weaves into his scenes, after the manner of an illuminator bordering the pages of a missal with arabesques and flowery devices: in the *Inferno* there are two similes based on flowers (*Inf.*, II, 127, and IX, 70), but there is no place for them among the shades. On the mount of Purgatory we find them in abundance at both confines of the land of purgation: in the Valley of the Princes the grass upon which the spirits sit is gemmed with flowers, among which the serpent tries to slip to disturb the peace of the place; the wings of the angel who admits the poets to the sixth round waft a breeze laden with the sweetness of grass and flowers (*Purg.*, XXIV, 147); then we have in the vision of Leah gathering flowers (XXVII, 99) the foreshadowing of the meeting with Matilda "choosing flower from flower with which her way was painted" in the earthly paradise (XXVIII, 41); then in XXVIII, 55 we learn that these flowers are "vermiglio e giallo." The passing of the candlesticks and elders in the church pageant is designated by the grass and flowers being rid of them; and it is in the midst of a rain of flowers thrown from the chariot of the church that Beatrice appears (XXX, 20 and 28). The elders who represent the books of the Old Testament are crowned with snowy lilies, the representatives of the Acts and Epistles with red. In *Paradise*, XXX, 65, by the banks of the stream of light, grow flowers "like rubies set in gold," and we find the yellow and white consummated in the heavenly rose, in

whose golden heart the snowy hosts of the Lord minister to the blessed. In Hell and Paradise alike green finds no place: Hope is not for the doubly dead, nor have those who have attained salvation need of her help: in Purgatory she appears on every hand, ready to sustain the laboring souls, faint in the pale rushes of humility that edge the shore, deep and strong in the eyes of Beatrice.

In his choice of flowers and flower colors Dante seems to have been guided by traditional symbolism and literary custom. We have the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys in the midst of silver, gold, and green in the Song of Solomon; in the Provençal we have "el prat son gruoc [yellow], vert e vermeilh," from P. Raimon de Toloza, *Poz vezem*, and "Don son vermelh, blanc e vert li brondelh;" again, in Petrarch we find "i fior vermigli e i bianchi" (Sonnet xxxi), and "Ma pur che l'òra un poco, Fior bianchi e gialli . . . mova" (*Canz.*, xii, 80-1), showing how red and yellow and white had become the conventional literary colors for flowers in the south; whereas in *Minnesang's Frühling*, p. 90, we find the blue that Philalethes wanted: "Wize, rote rosen, blawe bluomen, gruene gras."

It is perhaps worthy of notice that Petrarch follows Dante in the omission of blue from his palette: Laura's eyes are "tra 'l bel nero e 'l bianco" (*Canz.*, vii, 50), and red and white are most abundant after the green of the beloved laurel.

To return to the passage in the seventh Canto of the *Purgatorio*, what light have we gained, by this long digression, that may be turned upon it with advantage? With the exception of such a case as that of a color described as being "fra rose e viole," we have found the colors of flowers in Dante to be limited to red, white, and yellow. The "indico legno" would then seem to be some substance having one of these three colors. If we allow ourselves to be guided by the symmetry of the passage,—and Dante delighted in such formalities,—we find a second yellow to be required, and then

we shall have: *oro, argento, cocco, biacco, indico legno*; i. e., yellow, white, red, white, yellow (?).

What vegetable substance will satisfy all the needs of the passage? "Legno" is used to denote so many things made of wood that it is easy to see that it may be applied to any product of a tree, natural or artificial. In the *Divina Commedia* Dante uses it nine times meaning boat, five times for tree, once for board, once for the pole of the chariot of the Church, and once for the Cross of Christ, beside the passage in question. Now, what is there among the products of India that is clear and shining?

India was a natural source to draw on for similes, having been the country of marvels for many generations. In its untravelled lands fable placed the gardens of the Hesperides, transplanting them from the western to the eastern verge of the inhabited world; and in many legends the island of the earthly paradise was dimly visible from its farthest shores. According to Pliny (*Nat. Hist.*, VII, 2), "the trees, in India, are said to be of such vast height that it is impossible to send an arrow over them. This is the result of the singular fertility of the soil, the equable temperature of the atmosphere, and the abundance of water." Dante refers to this belief in *Purg.*, XXXII, 40-2, where, growing by the source of Lethe and Eunoë, above all atmospheric influence, in the soil where all fertility has its origin, the tree of knowledge "spreads its top so wide and high that it would be wondered at by the Indians in their forests."

In Pliny's *Natural History*, Book XXXVII, Chapter 11, we find India given as one of the sources of amber: a material, which, being of vegetable origin and both shining and clear, would fit our passage well, and one whose bright yellow would complete the color symmetry. Pliny gives us many Greek legends about amber, some referring to its Baltic, some to its Indian origin, and many, through a geographical ignorance that gives Pliny great joy, placing the islands where it is most abundant at the mouth of the Po instead of at that

of the Vistula. Among the facts recorded about it, referring to the uses made of it by the Germans, Pytheas is quoted as saying: "Incolas pro ligno ad ignem uti eo." The passages referring to India are the following: "item in India, gratiusque thure esse Indis; Ctesias Indis flumen esse Hypobarum, quo vocabulo significatur omnia in se ferre bona: fluere a Septemtrione in exortivum oceanum juxta montem silvestrem arboribus electum ferentibus. Arbores eas siptachoras vocari, qua appellatione significetur praedulcis suavitas." "Hic (Sophocles) ultra Indiam fieri dixit e lacrymis Meleagridum avum Meleagrum deflentium;" and again, "Certum est gigni in insulis septemtrionalis Oceani et a Germanis appellari glessum. . . . Nascitur autem de fluente medulla pinei generis arboribus, ut gummi in cerasis, resina pinis. Erumpit humoris abundantia: densatur rigore vel tepore aut mari (*al.* autumnali)." "Nasci et in India certum est. Archelaus, qui regnavit in Cappadocia, illinc pineo cortice inhaerente tradit advehi rude, polirique adipe suis lactentis in(*de*)coctum."

In Book iv, Ch. 27, Pliny quotes Timaeus on the subject of amber thrown up by the waves of the Baltic; and in Book iv, Ch. 30, there is another passage, referring to the amber-bearing islands of the North, closely followed by the statement that "Timaeus the historian says that in an island called Mictis . . . white lead is found." White lead and amber in such close proximity strongly suggest the "*biacca, Indico legno*" of the passage under consideration.

Pliny's long article on the nature and history of amber follows upon the sections treating of murrhine vessels and crystal, a juxtaposition which also finds its parallel in Dante, where, in *Par.*, xxix, 25, "*ambra*" is grouped with "*vetro*" and "*cristallo*."

In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Book II, Ch. 6, Dante mentions Pliny in a list of Latin prose writers of eminence,—a list that seems to be composed of the names of authors whose works were known to Dante, rather than a random selection from literary history.

Among other authors known to Dante we find the following references to amber: Virgil in the eighth Eclogue, lines 52-4, writes:—

“Nunc et oves ultro fugiat lupus, aurea duræ
Mala ferunt quercus, narcisso florent alnus
Pinguia corticibus sudent electra myricæ,”

recognizing the vegetable origin of amber. In Ovid, *Met.*, II, 340 et seq., the story of Phaëton tells how, after he was struck by lightning, his sisters were changed to poplars from which their tears fell as amber and were borne by the river, on whose bank they grew, into the sea. Lines 364-6 read as follows:—

“Inde fluunt lacrimæ, stillataque sole rigescunt
De ramis electra novis, quæ lucidus omnes
Excipit et nuribus mittit gestanda Latinis.”

Another line in Ovid (*Met.*, xv, 316):—

“Electro similes faciunt auroque capillos,”

recalls the passage in Pliny where he tells how “Domitius Nero in caeteris viae suae portentis capillos quoque conjugis suae Poppeae in hoc nomen adoptaverat quodam etiam carmine succinos appellando,” and how after that a new hair dye became the fashion in Rome under the name of amber-color (xxxvii, 12). Further, Solinus, *Polyhistor* (*De Scandinavia Insula*), writes “Et India habet succinum.” Isidore in his *Origines*, Book xvi, Ch. xxiii, describes the nature of amber and recognizes its vegetable origin in the following words: “Electrum vocatum quod ad radium solis clarius auro argentoque reluceat. Sol enim a poetis electron vocatur. Defaecatius est enim hoc metallum omnibus metallis. Hujus tria sunt genera. Unum quod ex pini arboribus fluit, quod succinum dicitur.” This last passage yields us three interesting points of comparison with the line in Dante’s poem. “Reluceat” conveys the same idea as Dante’s “lucido;” that this quality is said to be greater in amber than in either gold

or silver would give an ascending scale, such as we might look for, to the sequence of the colors of the line in the *Purgatorio*; "defaecatus" means clear, free from dregs, a meaning very well embodied in the Italian adjective "sereno."

The joint evidence of the various passages quoted would seem to be that the phraseology used by several of the authors with whose works Dante was familiar, in describing amber or using it in similes, was closely related to "Indico legno, lucido e sereno." The Indian origin is a point of common knowledge: Pliny does not hesitate to use the word "ligno" in connection with it; and by associating it with crystal and "adamantis" he, silently to be sure, notes those qualities which Isidore expresses by the words "reluceat" and "defaecatus."

The passage mentioning the lofty trees of India, taken together with the amber question, is of especial interest as showing a possible direct use made of the *Historia Naturalis* by Dante. Paget Toynbee, in the Dante Dictionary, was of the opinion that although Dante may have been acquainted with Pliny's work, he did not make actual use of it. May we hope to have added another name to the list of Dante's sources and to have thrown light on an obscure passage?

MABEL PRISCILLA COOK.